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ABSTRACT

In 1991 and 1992, two workshops for community college practitioners in Canada were conducted on the subject of disruptive classroom behavior. The participants began the workshops by generating individual lists of what they found to be irritating student behaviors. They then formed groups and generated lists which, in turn, were compiled into a master list of disruptive behaviors. From this list, each group picked one behavior which they found most irritating and attempted to develop strategies for dealing with that behavior. The irritating behaviors listed could be generally categorized as resulting from lack of socialization, lack of attention, and lack of maturity. One of the strategies discussed was defining the ground rules for the class at the outset. It was pointed out that if other rules needed to be introduced during the term, they should be considered carefully. The process of dealing with individual students was the other important issue discussed, with the conclusion reached that the student and the teacher should discuss the disruptive behavior one-on-one. Because classroom disruptions are debilitating to both teacher and students, it was suggested that instructors involve the non-disruptive students in modifying the conduct of the disruptive ones. Bringing in a supervisor to deal with a student who has exhibited repeated behavioral problems was recommended only as a last resort. Workshop participants tended to conclude that when students feel that they are in control of and have a stake in learning, many of the problems associated with disruptive behaviors may be resolved. (JMC)

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DEALING WITH DISRUPTIVE CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR

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Introduction

Disruptive behavior in the classroom is a concern for teachers and students alike. Effectiveness of learning can be enhanced if this type of behavior is identified and strategies are devised to counteract it. Concerned teachers often gather in their own institutions and/or in conferences to examine troublesome classroom behaviors and to generate strategies for their reduction. The author has conducted workshops on the subject of "disruptive classroom behavior" on two occasions: first at Red Deer College in May 1991 and the second at the Association of Community Colleges of Canada (ACCC) Conference in Montreal in May 1992. The following describes these workshops including a list of classroom behaviors found to be irritating as well as strategies which may increase classroom effectiveness. The paper concludes with some general observations regarding disruptive behavior and learning.

Workshop Format

The author began by getting the participants in the workshop to identify their reasons for attending the session. In the next phase, the participants generated individual lists of what they found to be disruptive classroom behavior. They then formed groups of three to five to generate group lists of irritating behaviors. Finally, a master list of disruptive behaviors was compiled. From this list, each group picked one behavior which they found most irritating and attempted to develop strategies for dealing with that behavior. This resulted in a list of strategies for decreasing classroom disruptions. This, in turn, led to a discussion about creating an effective learning atmosphere in a classroom.

Reasons for Attending Workshop

Many different reasons for attending the session were identified. Some teachers wished to learn why disruptive behaviors occur. Others wanted to find methods of making students responsible for their own behavior. Many participants felt that they don't deal well with disruptive behavior and wanted to learn how to tackle it effectively. Some teachers wanted to learn to develop less punitive interventions. Some participants were interested in learning about group behavior and some were interested in taking home some concrete strategies of intervention in the classroom.

Disruptive Behaviors

The following student behaviors were identified as disruptive at least once during the workshops:

-monopolizing class discussion

-talking when someone else is speaking

-exhibiting a challenging, arrogant or insolent manner

-making late and noisy entrances to the class

-displaying active disinterest (e.g. sleeping, walking out)

-packing up books before the class ends

-exhibiting disrespect (e.g. chewing gum)

-putting down other students

-asking irrelevant questions

-not having homework done

-not listening and then asking others about the material

-doing something else (e.g. other assignments) in the class

-refusing to participate in activities

-exhibiting lack of awareness of acceptable behavior (e.g. eating noisily, flying airplanes, passing notes)

-wearing unsuitable clothing (e.g. caps, insufficient clothing)

-being slow in moving in and out of groups

-creating difficulty in coming to a consensus

-over-reacting to assignments handed back

-undermining teacher's authority in class

These irritating behaviors can, in general, be categorized as behaviors due to lack of socialization, lack of attention, and lack of maturity. During the discussions, it was felt that these behaviors indicate that there is a general lack of respect. It was stated that this disrespect may be due to the generational differences between teachers and students as well as to a lack of interest in a required course.

Discussion of Strategies for Dealing with Disruptive Behaviors

One of the strategies discussed was to define the ground rules for the class at the outset. These rules may be defined in the course outline and might describe acceptable classroom behavior. Early definition may be the first line of defense against the antisocial and immature behavior encountered in the class. These rules may subsequently have to be reinforced several times in the class for the students who have difficulty remembering them. It is also necessary to be firm about these rules. The students should know what is acceptable in the class and what is not. At the same time, the students should also be aware that teachers really care about them as human beings, and want to treat them with respect, and that these rules are for class behavior so as to maximize learning.

Establishing a clear set of firm guidelines of behavior for the class at the outset should begin to deal with students who habitually come late or make noisy entrance to the class, pass notes in the class, fly airplanes or eat noisily. Some of these rules may reflect some commonsense provisions for the learners. In some of these situations, some compromise may be in order. For example, late comers may enter quietly for up to a certain time in the period, or the students may eat as long as there is no noise.

It was pointed out that if other rules need to be introduced during the term, they should be considered carefully. Under no circumstances should the teacher think of a rule on the spur of the moment and implement it immediately. Think of a prospective rule for a while and discuss it with a colleague. Only then should this rule be discussed with the class. If confronted by a student about certain discrepancies in any of these rules, the teacher should refrain from making ad-hoc decisions. It is acceptable to ask the student for some time to think about it before making a decision.

The process of dealing with individual students was the other important issue discussed. The student and the teacher should discuss the disruptive behavior one-on-one. It is unwise to get into a public display of frustration. Talk to the student after the class in private. Meet the student on neutral ground, perhaps over a coffee. The student should be allowed to make his or her point and the teacher should set out his or her expectations and frustrations with the behavior. Alternate methods of dealing with the problem should be discussed. Understanding each other's points of view is very helpful in resolving conflicts of this nature. Attempt to separate the behavior from the person. Clarify to the student that it is the behavior which is disruptive. Try to leave an "out" for the student. Use a problem solving approach. Listen, but do not get involved in a circular argument. It may be necessary to see the student more than once to discuss the disruptive behavior. These one-on-one conferences should set the parameters of and expectations for future behavior.

Individual disruptive behaviors which can be dealt with in one-on-one conferences are: a student putting down another student, asking irrelevant questions, not listening and then asking other students about material covered, doing other assignments in the class, refusing to participate in class activities, moving slowly in and our of groups, over-reacting to assignments handed back, or undermining instructor's authority in class.

Some of the irritating behaviors listed deal with group behaviors. If a class seems to want to interact within itself, it may be worthwhile to change the pace of the class. If they want to talk, give them a topic to discuss or a problem to solve in small groups. If they seem to be wanting to delay, try to find the rationale for their behavior. If they seem fidgety, give them a hands-on type of task. In other words, being flexible in the class presentation may be the key to dealing with students who are showing active disinterest, talking when someone else is speaking, refusing to participate in class activities and being slow in moving in/out of groups. If there are several activities for a class period, students with different learning styles and social needs may be satisfied with some part of the class. Changing pace and involving students in different activities such as creating a friendly rivalry between different groups in the class may also address difficulties of some students monopolizing discussions and others not participating.

During the workshops, it was pointed out that it may be advantageous to involve the non-disruptive students in modifying the conduct of the disruptive ones. Classroom disruptions are debilitating to both teacher and the students. Strategies may be developed to involve the students in controlling such behaviors. For example, signs (such as no smoking sign) can be posted in the class for objectionable behavior and students or the teacher can call attention to these behaviors and the class can be stopped (for a previously determined time span) to discuss such a behavior.

When confronted by a student who has exhibited repeated behavioral problems, it is tempting to bring in a supervisor. This tactic should only be used as a last resort. Similarly, the college policies on students' rights and responsibilities should only be invoked in a case where all else has failed. When a teacher resorts to these measures, it may be construed that he or she has lost control of the class. But if the teacher is at the end of his or her rope, by all means, these tactics should be used.

The workshop groups also discussed the difficulty some instructors have in differentiating how friendly they should be with their students. It is essential to be approachable and friendly. It may not be necessary to be friends with the students.

From Control to Empowerment

It is important to determine what motivates students to behave in a disruptive manner. Reading through the list of disruptive behaviors, it is interesting to see a number of "control" statements. Motivated by their need to create the best learning environment for the students, teachers often wish to control the students' behaviour in the classroom.

On the other hand, the discussion of strategies for dealing with disruptive behaviors hints at a transfer of control of the classroom from the teacher to the students. It talks of involving the stakeholders, the student as well as the teacher in the learning process. It talks of helping students determine why they are in the classroom and what motivates them. Once the students discover their reason for being in the classroom, they may become much more motivated to learn what they need for achieving their objectives. Such a process may empower them. They may feel more in control of their learning. Thus, through empowerment of the students, the control of the classroom shifts from the teacher to the students, and the problem of disruptive behavior is reduced considerably.

Conclusions

The fact that they are not the only ones having problems with objectionable behavior in the classroom was reassuring to the workshop participants. It was felt that there are no easy solutions to the difficulties. In spite of this, there were some good solutions generated. It was agreed that setting the ground rules for classroom behavior is a good beginning. Working within set parameters, and dealing with problem behavior on an individual basis is the next step. Being flexible and open to new approaches helps during the classroom presentation. Trying different methods of presenting the subject matter is helpful in getting most students involved in the learning process.

It is interesting to observe that during both the workshops, the early stages were marked by teachers complaining that they had lost control of the classroom. In the words of Rodney Dangerfield, the teachers felt that they "don't get no respect". But towards the end of these workshops, the participants agreed that if the students are empowered to feel that they are in control of what they learn and that they have a stake in the learning process, many of the problems of disruptive behavior may be resolved.

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